

# Russian Organizational Learning in the Context of the Afghanistan and Chechnya Counterinsurgencies

A Monograph

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## **Abstract**

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This monograph is applicable to the United States in that it demonstrates that a nation must not become wedded to a specific approach in order to succeed in future war. During the post-Vietnam era, the United States chose to put aside the lessons learned from counterinsurgency warfare and focus on a comfortable and conventional form of warfare. It seems America is doing the same thing again with respect to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, by focusing on evading such wars altogether.

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## Introduction

The United States is nearing completion of more than a decade of conflict in the Middle East. This period of warfare has strained both the American public and the military in terms of time, resources, and intellectual energy. The reason for the long duration and enormous resources invested in this war stems largely from two factors: a failure to envision an insurgency developing following an invasion and a general misunderstanding of the level of commitment required by both the military and the civilian population inherent in fighting a counterinsurgency war. While it is important to recognize that the United States' understanding of unconventional war is limited because it chose to ignore the lessons learned from previous experiences (Vietnam, Panama, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo), it is not the only superpower nation to have struggled with such a problem.

Russian experiences in unconventional warfare after World War Two – specifically in Afghanistan and Chechnya – highlight the difficulties in developing and employing a successful operational framework for unconventional operations.<sup>1</sup> In light of these difficulties, this monograph seeks to understand how the Russians – specifically the Russian General Staff – reacted to their experiences in Afghanistan and how that reaction framed their approach in Chechnya in 1994 and 1999. Russian counterinsurgency experiences after World War Two demonstrate that a state cannot completely rely upon conventional methods to achieve success in an irregular war. Rather, it must adopt tailored measures that apply to the specific situation in order to increase the likelihood of success in unconventional wars. The Russian military had previous experience in the North Caucasus – specifically in Chechnya in the nineteenth century – with which to operate effectively against irregular forces in both Afghanistan and Chechnya.

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<sup>1</sup> For ease of reading, the author will use the term “Russian” in this monograph to describe the Russian government both pre- and post-breakup of the Soviet Union. The main assumption and risk inherent in this use of the term “Russian” is that the government was similar both pre- and post-breakup.

However, it chose to proceed with the invasion of both nations under a comfortable and conventional paradigm rather than tailoring their approach to the specific situation. Basing their plans on these ingrained paradigms, which partially resulted from the residual effects of Stalin's 1937 Purge, caused them to commit a number of fatal errors as they progressed from Afghanistan to Chechnya.

First, they chose to re-frame their approach too late in the operation to ensure a successful outcome. Instead, by the time they transitioned from an aggressively violent approach that alienated a significant portion of the Afghan population to a tailored and more focused approach that included training local leaders and attacking the opposition forces with smaller forces, they had already lost the support of the Afghan populace. Then, they did not incorporate the lessons learned from their experiences in Afghanistan and apply them to operations in Chechnya. Instead, they approached these operations with the view that their military might and political structure would prevail. This monograph seeks to understand why this occurred.

### Research Question

This paper will answer the question how did the Russian General Staff react to and subsequently learn from the operational challenges posed by its involvement in irregular wars in Afghanistan (1979 – 1989) and Chechnya (1994 – 1996 and 1999 – 2010)? From this main question, several minor questions arise. What level of influence did the Russian General Staff have over the forces conducting operations in both Afghanistan and Chechnya that would allow it to drive institutional change? What lessons did the Russians take from their operations in Afghanistan? To what degree did the Russians employ these lessons in the development of the Chechnya operation? Did the fall of the Soviet Union change the manner or level of influence the General Staff had with regard to the development and management of military operations?

## Hypothesis

The Russian General Staff reacted too slowly to the challenges posed by the irregular conflicts by making minor adjustments to its operational approach while adhering to the belief that they could win decisively by massing armored and mechanized forces against their opponent. The Afghanistan invasion provided the Russian General Staff with its first major challenge to its unconventional warfare paradigm since their nineteenth century operations in the North Caucasus against the Chechen irregular forces. In response, the Russian General Staff attempted to adjust its operational approach by focusing on the employment of mobile forces such as aviation assets and special forces. However, despite these minor adjustments, the General Staff remained wedded to the idea of the decisive operation that allowed it to concentrate its forces and annihilate its opponents. This staunch belief in the primacy of conventional forces and violent offensive methods led the Russians to discard many of the lessons learned from Afghanistan and approach the Chechen wars with the same operational approach they employed during their invasion of Afghanistan.

## Methodology

Using historical doctrinal publications and the military writings of key leaders in the General Staff and the Russian military, this monograph analyzes key aspects of the Soviet way of war. These key aspects serve to give the reader a sense for the way in which the Russians viewed – and continue to view – warfare and how they saw themselves operating in war. Then, this paper argues that the Russian General Staff was the body within the military that was responsible for operational decisions during the conduct of war. Additionally, this paper argues that the General Staff's role in warfare did not change after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Finally, using key aspects of the Russian way of war, this paper analyzes two case studies to determine how the unique aspects of the two wars influenced their view of unconventional war.

Determining this allows an assessment of whether or not those changes were the right ones to take.

### Theoretical Approach

The theoretical approach applied in this monograph follows the ideas found in Thomas L. Kuhn's book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Specifically, Kuhn emphasizes the stiff resistance given to theoretical anomalies when they arise. According to Kuhn, theoretical anomalies are of two sorts. First, there are anomalies that are simply puzzling and therefore require no significant changes to the procedures and theories that underpin the scientific profession. An example of this is the response to an unexpected outcome in an experiment. Since the multitude of potential variables that could have contributed to the unexpected outcome is so immense, the scientist simply discards the anomaly as an aberration and continues to run the experiment. Additionally, anomalies of this sort tend to occur so often that if the scientist were to stop and examine every one he would never get any work accomplished. The second type of anomaly is one that gains general recognition by more of the profession's pre-eminent members and its resolution becomes the "subject matter of their discipline."<sup>2</sup> In his book, Kuhn investigates the impact of these theoretical anomalies on scientific theory.

Kuhn begins by defining "normal science" as a grouping of previous scientific achievements that are widely accepted within the scientific community and make up the foundations of the specific field.<sup>3</sup> For the most part, normal science remains a constant within the scientific community. However, anomalies arise. According to Kuhn, when anomalies arise the members of the scientific community do not immediately treat them as a serious challenge to

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas L. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 82-83.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

their theory or paradigm. Instead, they attempt to explain the anomaly away by making minor adjustments to the theory or paradigm. Scientists do this in order to both maintain the integrity of the scientific process and maintain their standing within the scientific community. However, there are times when unexplainable anomalies continue to persist to the point that they require a significant change to the theory. Kuhn identifies these periods as a “crisis.” However, scientists often address these periods of crisis with heavy resistance, not changing the theory unless they have a suitable replacement. Again, in the scientist’s view, the need to maintain the integrity of the process trumps the need to find the truth.<sup>4</sup> While Kuhn’s theory is concerned with explaining scientific phenomena, one could extrapolate its principles to social phenomena.

The scientific community is composed of human beings who think, decide, and act within a structured grouping. The structure is composed of laws and norms that enable the individuals to operate in a predictable manner. Additionally, within the scientific community there exists a desire to understand the world. This understanding is rooted in solid scientific principles that have existed for a significant length of time. A nation – especially its military component – operates in a similar fashion.

Rules and social norms guide a nation’s actions. Well-established principles of governance and the application of military power enable it to understand the world and operate effectively in the international environment. Therefore, because of the similarities between the scientific community and a nation, Kuhn’s scientific principles are applicable to a social environment and can help explain social phenomena, such as how the Russians reacted to the challenges posed by counterinsurgency warfare.

In evaluating the Russian response to the challenges posed in Afghanistan to its understanding of warfare, this monograph applies this theoretical approach to determine if the

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas L. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 67, 77.

Russian General Staff viewed the challenges posed by irregular forces as a refutation of their theory of war or just an anomaly to be explained by making minor adjustments to their theory. This binary framing of the problem – Afghanistan was either an anomaly or a crisis – while simplistic, suffices for this monograph. The various nuances of rejecting certain aspects of the Russian way of warfare vice the entire framework were certainly present in the deliberations following the departure from Afghanistan; however, the impact these nuances had on the Russian military was negligible. Additionally, as this monograph will elaborate, the Russians viewed their way of warfare as supreme because of its effectiveness during the Second World War and during their interventions into Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Therefore, any adjustments would require a great investment in people – primarily the education and advanced training of conscripts – and resources, assets they did not have in great supply.

### **Development of Soviet and Russian Operational Art and Way of War**

The Russians' view of warfare stemmed from their historical experiences. In order to understand this particular view of war, one must understand the following factors: the development of operational art after the Russo-Japanese War, the impacts of the Russian experiences in the Second World War, the influences of Russian operations in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the rise of nuclear weapons after World War Two, and the role Marxism-Leninism played in the Russian view of war. Beginning with the development of operational art after the Russo-Japanese war, this section seeks to shed some light on the mind-set of the Russian military leading up to its intervention into Afghanistan in 1979.

#### **Development of Operational Art After the Russo-Japanese War**

Sparked by the Russo-Japanese War and seriously studied after the October Revolution in 1917 was the idea that there needed to be changes in the way that the Russian military was organized and operated. One of the key agents for change was a man by the name of Mikhail

Vasilyevich Frunze. Frunze believed that in order for the military and the state to progress, the military needed a unified military doctrine.<sup>5</sup> In elaborating on this unified military doctrine, Frunze wrote,

The state should, ahead of time, determine the nature of the general, and in particular, military policy, set the possible object of its military aspirations in accord with it and work out and establish a definite plan of statewide activities which would take into account the future clashes and which would ensure their success by the efficient use of the people's energy.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, under this doctrine, Frunze sought to align the direction of the state with that of its military arm in order to increase the likelihood success in future war. He published these concepts in July 1921 in a work entitled, *A Unified Military Doctrine and the Red Army*. Additionally, Frunze, through this work, was able to combine the scientific approach to socialist ideals through the incorporation of objective realities of the state's social system into military-political and military-theoretical ideas.<sup>7</sup> This employment of scientific principles into doctrine then bled over into discussions of operational art.

The Russian realization of an additional component of war between strategy and tactics – specifically operational art – was an emergent concept that arose from the writings of Russian thinkers such as Colonel Aleksandr A. Neznamov (1878 – 1928), Vladimir K. Triandafillov (1894 – 1931), Georgii Samoilovich Isserson (1898 – 1976), and Aleksandr Svechin (1878 – 1938).<sup>8</sup> The idea for this area of focus between the strategic and tactical levels of war arose from Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War and it underwent further refinement during the First

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<sup>5</sup> Makhmut Akhmetovich Gareev, *M.V. Frunze: Military Theorist* (McLean, VA: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, Inc., 1988), 101.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>8</sup> Richard W. Harrison, *The Russian Way of War: Operational Art, 1904-1940* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2001), 35.

World War. Neznamov, as an instructor at the General Staff Academy in 1907, provided lectures on strategy that linked tactical and operational actions to higher strategic objectives.<sup>9</sup>

Triandafillov, in addressing the Military Academy in 1923, outlined the concept of dividing a campaign or war into smaller, logically linked operations because in the current operational environment it was not feasible to defeat an enemy in one decisive blow.<sup>10</sup> Isserson viewed operational art in terms of the deep battle whereby one would achieve a decisive victory through “a series of successive strategic efforts, and...a series of separate campaigns in a single war.”<sup>11</sup> Arguably, of these four Russian theoreticians, Svechin was the most prominent.<sup>12</sup> In 1923 while describing “operational art,” Svechin wrote,

Tactics and administration are the material of operational art and the success of the development of an operation depends on both the successful solution of individual tactical problems by the forces and the provision of all the material they need to conduct an operation without interruption until the ultimate goal is achieved... Operational art also dictates the basic line of conduct of an operation, depending on the material available, the time which may be allotted to the handling of different tactical missions, the forces which may be deployed for battle on a certain front, and finally the nature of the operation itself.<sup>13</sup>

By describing operational art in these terms, Svechin highlighted the relationship between tactical actions and the material – or strategic – requirements needed to sustain such actions. This is important to the thesis of this monograph in that it describes the fact that Russians understood operational art as the conduct of warfare in a very scientific and systematic manner. Additionally,

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<sup>9</sup> Bruce W. Menning, *Bayonets Before Bullets: The Imperial Russian Army, 1861-1914* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 207.

<sup>10</sup> Vladimir K. Triandafillov, *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies* (Portland: Frank Cass, 1994), xxx.

<sup>11</sup> Georgii Samoilovich Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art* (Ft Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2013), 48.

<sup>12</sup> Milan Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Newport: US Naval War College, 2007), I-3.

<sup>13</sup> Aleksandr A. Svechin, *Strategy*, ed. Kent D. Lee (Minneapolis: East View Publications, 1991), 69.

making continuous adjustments to the environment adversely affects the sustainment of tactical actions. This over-reliance on one set method of conducting war significantly hampered the Russian troops when they faced a determined irregular force. This way of thinking would translate into how the Russian military viewed war.

### The Russian Way of War

The Russian way of war focused almost entirely on the offense. To the Russians, offensive operations include the violent deployment of massive mechanized forces employing combined arms in echelon against a foe irrespective of the opponent's size or the circumstances surrounding the operation. This view of warfare arose primarily out of the Marxist-Leninist dogma of aggressively stamping out uprisings in a constant fight against the expansion of capitalism. Additional factors included the successes the Red Army experienced in the latter stages of the Second World War, the creation and expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the impact Stalin had on squelching any creative or innovative thought, the Russian successes in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and the introduction and subsequent rise in influence of nuclear weapons. All of these factors contributed to the Russian belief that external factors were suppressing them and they needed to act aggressively to counteract them.

These firmly held beliefs were effective in World War Two scenarios – because they were fighting a conventional force – and the limited engagements in Czechoslovakia and Hungary – because the opponents were not completely dedicated to defeating the Russians – leading up to the invasion of Afghanistan. However, they did not serve the Russians well as they attempted to devise an effective operational approach against the Afghan insurgents. The reason was that the Afghan opponents neither were a conventional force nor easily cowed by the Russian show of force. The following paragraphs further describe how these different factors explain the Russian way of war.

## Marxist-Leninism

In 1974, then Minister of Defense Marshal A. A. Grechko wrote in a leading Party journal that the Russian Armed Forces should be prepared to counter the actions of the imperialists wherever they arise.<sup>14</sup> This re-invigoration of the influence of Marxism-Leninism in the military's application of force in times of war was an interwoven theme throughout Russian doctrine. Additionally, it underlined all of its views on warfare.

In 1848, Karl Marx wrote his *Communist Manifesto* in which he advocated the rise of the proletariat against the bourgeois – represented by the capitalists.<sup>15</sup> In the late 1800s, Vladimir Lenin became a Marxist and, after playing a pivotal role in the October Revolution of 1917, became the leader of Russia. As Lenin applied Marxist principles to the current realities, he began to realize that war between the socialist and capitalists was inevitable because of the “inherent lawless, exploitative, and counterrevolutionary nature of capitalist states.”<sup>16</sup> Since war was inevitable, Lenin sought to both increase Russia's defenses and prepare the military for a violent war. This line of thinking would guide the Russians through the Second World War.

From the Russian perspective, the period following the Second World War was a time of solidifying the Russian periphery vice territorial expansion past their immediate sphere of influence. Because of this view, they sought only to protect from capitalist greed what they already owned. One key aspect of maintaining what they owned was retaining the ability to protect their socialist comrades from the uprisings incited by capitalist nations. With respect to these insurgencies, Marx and Lenin taught that when counter-revolutionary forces rose up they should be attacked swiftly, violently, and decisively in order to prevent their infection of the

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<sup>14</sup> Alex P. Schmid, *Soviet Military Interventions Since 1945* (New Brunswick: Transaction, Inc. 1985), 59.

<sup>15</sup> Karl Marx, *Communist Manifesto* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1954), 13.

<sup>16</sup> David M. Glantz. *The Military Strategy of the Soviet Union: A History* (Portland: International Specialized Book Services, Inc., 1992), 32.

population.<sup>17</sup> Employing only passive measures would not guarantee success because rebellions could spread quickly and exponentially if not put down quickly.

#### World War Two, Stalin, and the Offense

During the reforms that followed the Second World War, the Russian view of warfare reflected lessons learned from action during the latter portion of that war, namely, success relied on “the offensive, characterized by widespread maneuver and judicious use of massed armor, artillery, and airpower.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the military believed that it could achieve success by conducting a series of violent offensive operations successively in order to achieve intermediate objectives that led to the final strategic objective. Additionally, at the strategic level, the Russians placed much focus on how to successfully transition from the defense to the offense.<sup>19</sup> Joseph Stalin further ingrained this philosophy of war by keeping a tight grasp on how the military thought.

Joseph Stalin’s tight grasp on how the military thought and fought ensured that there was no other way to fight. Stalin’s “permanent factors of war,” which were a set of principles that he viewed as essential to military victory, exemplified both his way of thinking and, in practice, his hatred for any application of them in any form of war other than a strong offensive. These “permanent factors” included, “...stability and morale of the home front, the morale of the troops at the front and rear, the quantity and quality of an army’s divisions, the quantity and quality of

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<sup>17</sup> Timothy L. Thomas, *Recasting the Red Star: Russia Forges Tradition and Technology Through Toughness* (Fort Leavenworth: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2011), 77.

<sup>18</sup> David M. Glantz, *The Military Strategy of the Soviet Union: A History* (Portland: International Specialized Book Services, Inc., 1992), 176.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

military equipment, and the quantity and quality of the military leadership.”<sup>20</sup> Although these factors are sound and continued to have an effect long after Stalin’s death, they *represented* Stalin’s unchanging view of how Russia prepares for and executes war. If any of Stalin’s generals were to make an argument against any of these factors or propose another one, Stalin would immediately dismiss him or have him executed as he did in the 1937 Purge. This crushing of creativity had the effect of denying Russia the ability to evolve and adapt militarily to the changing contemporary environment. The perceived expansionistic tendencies of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization served to exacerbate the need for a strictly offensive approach to war.

#### North Atlantic Treaty Organization Expansion

In the post-World War Two era, the Russians viewed Western powers as a continuous threat. The United States’ enactment of the Marshall Plan and the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization further intensified this belief. This expansion, which the West viewed as a necessary step to contain the perceived communist growth, posed a threat to the Russian sphere of influence. In response, Russia further solidified the buffer zone between themselves and the foreign aggressors and their ideas. This led to the development of the Warsaw Pact coalition, which intended to compete with the threat posed by the Western alliance.<sup>21</sup> This, coupled with the lessons of the advantages of offensive warfare learned after the Second World War, caused Russia to adopt a way of warfare that aggressively sought to protect its sphere of influence through offensive measures.

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<sup>20</sup> Alfred L. Monks, *Soviet Military Doctrine: 1960 to the Present* (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1984), 15.

<sup>21</sup> David M. Glantz, *The Military Strategy of the Soviet Union: A History* (Portland: International Specialized Book Services, Inc., 1992), 169-172.

However, Stalin's death in 1953 reinvigorated dialogue within the Russian military. One of the main themes that came out of the post-Stalin discussions was a focus on surprise as a primary ingredient to successful operations.<sup>22</sup> By conducting a surprise attack against an imminent threat, Russian forces could ensure the success of offensive operations despite their qualitative disadvantage. This would carry over into their thoughts on nuclear weapons.

### Impact of Nuclear Weapons

In the immediate aftermath of World War Two, Stalin and the Russian military significantly downplayed the existence of nuclear weapons.<sup>23</sup> However, after Stalin's death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev decided to embrace the possibilities inherent in nuclear weapons and re-oriented the Russian military to deal with both the threat of a nuclear strike from an adversary and the incorporation of this weapon into Russian doctrine. In a speech to the Fourth Session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, Khrushchev outlined the Russian policy on nuclear weapons. Specifically, he noted that future war would include deep nuclear strikes aimed at strategic centers. In order to combat this, Russia would continue to develop nuclear weapons in order to meet and exceed the threat posed by the United States. Additionally, since the nuclear weapon was so devastating Russia would need fewer numbers of soldiers within its military formations.<sup>24</sup> Russian doctrine focused on this theory for the next two decades.

In 1968, a small yet profound revision was beginning to emerge in Russian doctrine. Marshal of Russia V. D. Sokolovskiy wrote an article in the Russian publication *Military*

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<sup>22</sup> Alfred L. Monks, *Soviet Military Doctrine: 1960 to the Present* (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1984), 17.

<sup>23</sup> Harriet Fast Scott and William F. Scott, *The Armed Forces of the USSR* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), 47.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 42-43.

*Thought*, in which he presented the case for conducting a conflict under non-nuclear terms.<sup>25</sup> This change in theory arose out of the paradigm-shifting adoption by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization of the practice of flexible response. It challenged the assumption that any war between the Warsaw Pact nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization would be a nuclear war. Despite these changes, Russians still believed that even in a primarily conventional war nuclear weapons would still provide the decisive blow to the enemy.<sup>26</sup>

#### Interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia

During the period between the end of the Second World War and the intervention into Afghanistan in 1979, Russia conducted two major interventions that framed how it approached the Afghanistan problem. These two interventions were the crushing of the Hungarian Uprising in 1956 and the intervention into Czechoslovakia in 1968. Both served as the operational framework for how Russia approached the conflict in Afghanistan because they were pre-emptive and completed in a short time.

The Hungarian Uprising of 1956 arose from the period of confusion that followed the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953. Stalin's death coupled with Nikita Khrushchev's secret denunciation of Stalinism in his meeting with the Twentieth Party Conference in February 1956 emboldened anti-Russian elements within Hungary to revolt against their government and the emplacement of Russian troops within Hungary's borders.<sup>27</sup> The initial Russian reaction to this

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<sup>25</sup> Harriet Fast Scott and William F. Scott, *The Armed Forces of the USSR* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), 52.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>27</sup> Alex P. Schmid, *Soviet Military Interventions Since 1945* (New Brunswick: Transaction, Inc. 1985), 26.

turn of events was to deploy a small force to Hungary as a show of force. While this act initially quelled the rebellion, the rebels rebounded and reinvigorated their efforts.

Understanding that a limited show of force was not an effective deterrent to the rebels' efforts, Russia conducted a second intervention that was extremely heavy-handed and violent. Casualty estimates from the second intervention were 20,000 dead and nearly 13,000 wounded Hungarians. Russian casualties amounted to only 7,000.<sup>28</sup> This violent approach resulted in Hungary returning to the Warsaw Pact and becoming one of Russia's more stable allies within Eastern Europe.<sup>29</sup> Russia would apply this same approach in Czechoslovakia.

In 1962, the Czechoslovakian economy entered a period of severe stagnation. Despite Russian-type economic reforms, the economy continued to stagnate and public discontent grew. In response, Russia – who had no troops stationed in Czechoslovakia at the time – inserted troops into Czechoslovakia under the guise of military maneuvers and maintained them there past their redeployment date as a show of force. As in the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, this limited attempt to quell a political uprising had little effect. Realizing it must act more forcefully in order to stamp out the uprising, Russia called upon its communist allies in the Warsaw Pact and entered Czechoslovakia in force in 1968. Their main aim was to secure major cities and airports.<sup>30</sup> Since Russia and its combined forces were such a formidable entity, very little fighting occurred and casualties were light. While change did not come quickly, by 1971 a new pro-Russian government under Gustav Husak took charge and relations between the two nations stabilized.

In summary, the Russian way of war grew out of its understanding of operational art after its defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, its Marxist-Leninist dogma, its experiences from the

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<sup>28</sup> Alex P. Schmid, *Soviet Military Interventions Since 1945* (New Brunswick: Transaction, Inc. 1985), 27.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32.

Second World War, the rise of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and nuclear weapons, and its interventions into Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The result of these factors was that offensive operations executed violently and successively would guarantee Russian military success. Stalin's "permanent factors" of warfare coupled with his inability to adjust his principles to a changing environment and the Marxist-Leninist tradition of violently attacking separatist movements kept the Russian military in a singular mindset. However, once Stalin passed in 1953, Russian military leaders began to challenge Stalin's beliefs in restricting dialogue. The result of this dialogue was that the Russian military needed to re-focus on surprise in the execution of its military operations in order to compensate for its qualitative disadvantage against Western powers.

The advent of nuclear weapons challenged Russian thinking about how they conducted war in that a single strategically placed nuclear warhead could lead to decisive victory. This negated the perceived Russian advantage of reliance on large mechanized and armored formations to win decisively on the battlefield. Coupled with the rise of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Russians felt the need to defend their territory and the territories of their communist brethren. This manifested itself through the creation of the Warsaw Pact and increased production of nuclear weapons in order to maintain the impression of nuclear parity with its Western opposition. This need to maintain a military balance with the West because it posed the greatest threat to the Russian way of life locked the Russians into an offensively focused mindset. This mindset, as a fundamental component of the way Russia viewed war, was so ingrained into the Russian military and political system that it hindered the military from adjusting to any military situation – i.e. Afghanistan – that did not conform to that paradigm.

## Russian General Staff

Prior to the rise of the Imperial Russian General Staff, the Russian armed forces employed the Russian Army's General Headquarters as its organizing body.<sup>31</sup> Then, because of the influence of the German Army General Staff in the early 1900s, the Russians began to consider transformation to a similar system. However, the seed for a general staff did not take root until after the Bolshevik Revolution with the creation of the All-Russian Main Staff in 1918. Over the next seventeen years, the general staff would undergo many changes in both name and organizational structure. Finally, in September 1935, Russia formed the General Staff. Then, in 1936, Russia established a dedicated academy – the Military Academy of the General Staff – to train members of the General Staff.<sup>32</sup>

The Russian General Staff was composed of five separate directorates: Operations, Intelligence, Organization-Mobilization, Military Transportations, and Logistics and Supply Planning.<sup>33</sup> During the Second World War, Stalin took the General Staff under his wing and made it answerable to him alone. By doing this, Stalin set the precedent that the General Staff was a privileged body within the Russian military establishment. This position within the military establishment continues today. In fact, the General Staff's pre-eminent role within the Russian military only grew after the Second World War.

After World War Two, the General Staff was responsible for the planning and conceptual development of strategic operations to include the composition of forces, designation and direction of the main element to include the strategic missions of the *fronts*, and the timing of

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<sup>31</sup> Harriet Fast Scott and William F. Scott, *The Armed Forces of the USSR* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

offensive operations.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, according to Russian doctrine, the General Staff provided oversight and direction of the main effort in combat operations.<sup>35</sup> Finally, the Russian General Staff had the responsibility of training the subordinate Services' staffs and developing reports and studies of military operations.<sup>36</sup> In essence, the General Staff was in charge of the employment of military forces in any theater the Russian political leadership decided to act. This high level of involvement and expansive breadth of influence meant that the General Staff bore much responsibility for the outcomes of military engagements. As a testament to its integral role in the operations of the Russian armed forces, the military disruption that resulted from the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union did not adversely affect the General Staff.

General of the Army V.G. Kulikov, in an article written in the Russian journal *Military Thought* in November 1974, highlighted the many accomplishments of Marshal B.M. Shaposhnikov (Chief of the General Staff). Specifically, Kulikov highlighted Shaposhnikov's successes in the realms of organizing the Russian Armed Forces, the training of its leaders, and the writing of military studies that formed the basis for the Russian way of war.<sup>37</sup> In writing this tribute, General Kulikov indicated that the General Staff was such an integral part of the military that to disband such an organization would amount to throwing away decades of experience and military thought. Such an action was unthinkable. Therefore, despite the fact that the fall of the Soviet Union ushered in a period where Russia's military force had completely deteriorated, the

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<sup>34</sup> David M. Glantz, *The Military Strategy of the Soviet Union: A History* (Portland: International Specialized Book Services, Inc., 1992), 178.

<sup>35</sup> Department of the Army. FM 100-2-1, *The Soviet Army: Operations and Tactics* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office. July 1984), 1-1.

<sup>36</sup> Ghulam D. Wardak, *The Voroshilov Lectures, Materials from the Soviet General Staff Academy: Volume II – Issues of Soviet Military Strategy* Edited by Graham Hall Turbiville, Jr. (Washington: National Defense University Press, 1990), 33.

<sup>37</sup> United States Air Force, *Selected Soviet Military Writings 1970-1975: A Soviet View* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, May 1977), 185-186.

Russian government decided to maintain the General Staff rather than dismantle it along with the rest of the Russian military. A key reason for maintaining the General Staff was the understanding that Russia would be involved in wars in the future and it needed an entity that understood how to plan and prepare Russian armed forces for future war.<sup>38</sup>

### **Case Study: Afghanistan, 1979 – 1989**

The invasion of Afghanistan provided the Russian military with its first real test of fighting a determined irregular force since its clashes with the guerrilla forces in Ukraine and Lithuania after World War Two. The mountainous environment of Afghanistan proved to be exceedingly challenging to the Russian forces that were trained and equipped to fight on the steppes of Eastern Europe. Additionally, the indomitable Afghan opposition forces were more determined to oppose the Russians than the relatively ineffectual Hungarians and Czechoslovakians that the Russians engaged with in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, given these apparently obvious differences, the Russia military continued as if their existing military framework accounted for these variances. This section seeks to discover the reasons behind this phenomenon.

#### Lead Up to War

Despite numerous senior military leader reconnaissance missions inside Afghanistan in the months prior to the invasion and a significant advisory mission in Afghanistan after the agreement to increase economic aid in the 1950s and 1960s, Russian military and political leaders assessed the Afghans as backward and illiterate. Because of this view, they inferred that the

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<sup>38</sup> Michael D. Krause and R. Cody Phillips, *Historical Perspectives of the Operational Art* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2007), 277.

Afghan insurgents did not have the will to resist Russian aggression.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, given the limited objectives the Russians sought in Afghanistan – reviving the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan’s army under a pro-Russian government – and the limited forces that the Russians were willing to dedicate to this mission, it is reasonable to assume that the Russians believed that they did not need an in-depth analysis of the foe.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, from December 26-27, 1979, Russia invaded Afghanistan with an element called the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces. This was a force composed of approximately 15,000 personnel.

This Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces approached the invasion of Afghanistan as Russians had approached all of their operations post-World War Two. Therefore, they would attack with speed and violence, paying very little attention to how their operations affected the local populace. The minimal preparation time afforded to the subordinate commanders only added to this reliance on previous approaches. As an example of the hurried nature of the operation, Colonel General Iu. V. Tukharinov, commander of the Fortieth Army, which was the major command in charge of the invasion, received the operational plans only two weeks prior to the invasion.<sup>41</sup> Because of the limited understanding of both the enemy and friendly forces, when Russian forces arrived in theater and established their defensive perimeter they were surprised that the pro-Russian Afghan armed forces were unwilling to leave the security of their posts inside the Afghan capital and fight the insurgents. Because of this, the Russians had to engage the

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<sup>39</sup> Johanna C. Granville, *Soviet Decision-Making: A Comparative Analysis of the Interventions in Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Afghanistan (1979)* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1992), 293.

<sup>40</sup> Robert F. Baumann, *Leavenworth Papers Number 20: Russian-Soviet Unconventional Wars in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Afghanistan* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, 1993), 135.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

opposition outside of the key infrastructure and main routes – an action they wanted very badly to avoid because they wanted to limit their interaction with the local populace.<sup>42</sup>

#### Lead Up and Conduct of War

The reasons for entering Afghanistan in 1979 and the objectives sought stem from Russia's involvement in Afghanistan beginning in the 1960s. During the 1950s, the United States and the Russians provided hundreds of millions of dollars of aid to Afghanistan; however, the United States refused to supply Afghanistan with military aid because they viewed Afghanistan as militarily indefensible and strategically unimportant. In response, the Afghan government turned away from the United States and aligned itself with the Russians. This relationship continued to build through the next two decades. Though, in the early 1970s, Afghanistan experienced a number of political coups resulting in Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud's removal from power. The new communist leadership led by Nur Mohammed Taraki instituted many reforms that chafed against Afghan and Muslim culture.<sup>43</sup>

In response, Islamist guerrillas seized key population centers from the government and threatened Taraki's rule. In light of the dire situation, Taraki made numerous appeals to the Russians for involvement. Initially, the Russians refused because they did not want to get embroiled in an Afghan civil war. Finally, in September 1979, members of the People's

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<sup>42</sup> Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress, eds., *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost: the Russian General Staff* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 18-19.

<sup>43</sup> Matt M. Matthews, *Occasional Paper 36: "We Have Not Learned How to Wage War There" – The Soviet Approach in Afghanistan 1979 – 1989* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2011), 5-6.

Democratic Party of Afghanistan killed Taraki and replaced him with Hafizullah Amin. The assassination of Taraki convinced the Russians that involvement was necessary.<sup>44</sup>

In December 1979, the Russian Politburo decided to invade Afghanistan and informed the Chief of the Soviet General Staff, Marshal Nikolai Vasilyevic Ogarkov, to prepare an invasion force. Ogarkov objected because he felt intervention was reckless and the Politburo had not allocated enough forces to execute the mission effectively. Despite Ogarkov's warnings, the Politburo went ahead with preparations. The objectives of the operation involved,

...stabilizing the country by garrisoning the main routes, major cities, airbases and logistics sites; relieving the Afghan government forces of garrison duties and pushing them into the countryside to battle the resistance; providing logistic, air, artillery, and intelligence support to the Afghan forces; providing minimum interface between the Soviet occupation forces and the local populace; accepting minimal Soviet casualties; and, strengthening the Afghan forces, so that once resistance was defeated, the Soviet Army could be withdrawn.<sup>45</sup>

The invasion and subsequent removal of the incapable leadership in Afghanistan went smoothly and just as planned. Once the Russians accomplished their initial objectives, they established a defensive perimeter around Kabul and began organizing the Afghan army to combat the revolutionary forces. Unfortunately, after major combat operations concluded, the Afghan opposition forces re-organized themselves into small bands and began employing guerrilla tactics. This transition proved to be overwhelming to Russian conventional forces, challenging their operational approach throughout the remainder of the war.

From March 1980 to April 1985, the movement of opposition forces into the mountainous regions of the country forced the Russians to abandon large-scale operations and focus on attacking the opposition's bases and lines of communication. The Russians employed

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<sup>44</sup> Matt M. Matthews, *Occasional Paper 36: "We Have Not Learned How to Wage War There" – The Soviet Approach in Afghanistan 1979 – 1989* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2011), 6-8.

<sup>45</sup> Lester W. Grau, ed., *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (London, UK: Frank Cass, 1988), xviii-xix.

their helicopters and special forces to conduct targeted raids against opposition strongholds.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, due to the political limitations associated with a massive deployment of military personnel in support of a limited war, Russia adjusted its operations to include more airpower. This transition to the predominance of airpower enabled the Russians to attack the opposition's lines of communication, isolate its rear area, and attack the agricultural sector that supported it.<sup>47</sup> However, due to the brutality inflicted on the populace and the massive destruction of Afghan property that characterized the beginning stages of the war, the minor changes in the operational approach proved to be too little and too late in the operation to change the tide of the war. After 1985, the Russians' focus changed to a successful political withdrawal vice a military victory.

Russian efforts to strengthen the Afghan defense forces advanced in earnest in late 1985 to early 1986 after their combat power had reached its peak of 108,000 personnel in theater. In this role, Russians worked with the Afghan government to establish relationships with previously ostracized segments of the population in an effort to bolster the legitimacy of the Afghan government. The Russians conducted all of these activities while subsequently and slowly backing away from direct actions with the enemy. By the end of 1986, the Russians had begun withdrawing combat forces.<sup>48</sup>

By 1987, the Russians had come to the full realization that there was no feasible military solution to the Afghan problem. In an effort to withdraw from Afghanistan with honor, the Russians began working with the international community to secure a favorable resolution to the

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<sup>46</sup> Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress, eds., *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost: the Russian General Staff* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 20-21.

<sup>47</sup> Stephen J. Blank, *Operational and Strategic Lessons of the War in Afghanistan, 1979-90* (Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 1991), 73.

<sup>48</sup> Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress, eds., *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost: the Russian General Staff* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 26-27.

Afghan war and a speedy withdrawal of Russian armed forces. Finally, on February 15, 1989 the last Russian troops departed Afghanistan.<sup>49</sup>

### Lessons of War

The lessons Russians gleaned from their experiences from Afghanistan were many – the need for a coherent counterinsurgency doctrine, the success of establishing a local national training program, the ineffectiveness of heavy armor in mountainous terrain, and the need to maintain control over an area after combat operations.<sup>50</sup> However, the deteriorating status of the Soviet Union hampered inclusion of these lessons in Russian policy or doctrine.<sup>51</sup> Other roadblocks to the implementation of Afghanistan lessons learned existed. First, was the decision by the Russian government to change its focus from an offensive to a defensive posture that required reductions in troop strengths. Second, the fall of the East German regime increased the threat from an attack by the West. Finally, the ideological – unwavering reliance on a conscript versus a professional military – and technological impediments to change severely hampered them.

In December 1988, Mikhail Gorbachev announced to the world that Russia would remove itself from its satellite positions and adopt a politically defensive stance. While this helped Russia gain support from the West, it posed a problem for the General Staff. Specifically, the General Staff, whose responsibility it was to develop a coherent view of how the Russian military would fight in the future, had to devise a strategy that would enable Russia to maintain

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<sup>49</sup> Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress, eds., *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost: the Russian General Staff* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 28-29.

<sup>50</sup> Matt M. Matthews, *Occasional Paper 36: “We Have Not Learned How to Wage War There” – The Soviet Approach in Afghanistan 1979 – 1989* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2011), 64-66.

<sup>51</sup> David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Art: Challenges and Change in the 1990s* (Fort Leavenworth: Foreign Military Studies Office, 1991), 3.

an effective, offensive capability while supporting the political leadership's vision of a defensive posture for the military.<sup>52</sup> Not only did the General Staff have to devise a strategy from these fundamentally dichotomous concepts, it had to do this with significantly reduced personnel. This switch to a defensive posture is important to the thesis of this monograph in that it highlights the fact that the Russians viewed Afghanistan as a Kuhnian anomaly instead of a crisis. Therefore, instead of moving along a path that would address the challenges posed by the Afghan insurgents to their way of warfare, they retracted to a defensive posture; a concept they understood better than counterinsurgency. By doing this, they symbolically denied that their experiences in Afghanistan posed a serious challenge to their way of warfare.

The reduction of the Russian military and the subsequent restructuring of the military force were the key products of the new defensive strategy.<sup>53</sup> As could be expected, the General Staff and Defense Ministry violently opposed such a reduction, and subsequently devoted significant time and resources arguing against it in Defense Council sessions. Because the General Staff focused intensely on fighting the draw down, they had little time to consider how to implement lessons from the Afghanistan war. The fall of the Berlin Wall, a key Russian bastion in Eastern Europe despite Russia's declaration to withdraw from its satellite positions, further exacerbated Russia's problems.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and subsequent re-unification of Germany in 1989 further exacerbated the deterioration of the Soviet sphere of influence and created another distraction from the integration of Afghanistan lessons.<sup>54</sup> The Berlin Wall was a buffer against the expansion

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<sup>52</sup> David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Art: Challenges and Change in the 1990s* (Fort Leavenworth: Foreign Military Studies Office, 1991), 15.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>54</sup> Harry Gelman, *Adelphi Papers #258: Gorbachev and the Future of the Soviet Military Institution* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1991), 33.

of the West into the Russian sphere of influence. Its fall created a crisis within the Soviet Union for two reasons.

First, without the East German safeguard against Western attacks, the Soviet Union no longer had safe and secure borders. Instead, it had a border that was vulnerable to an attack at any time by capitalist forces. Second, the loss of a forward base meant that the Russian forces occupying those positions would return to the Soviet Union and require housing, a commodity the Soviet Union did not have the infrastructure to support. In addition to these important security issues that the Russian's faced in the immediate aftermath of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Russians encountered key conceptual problems associated with addressing two of the major lessons from the Afghanistan war, namely, the lack of a counterinsurgency doctrine and the need to increase the technological capability of the Russian military.

According to Lenin, there are four broad categories of war:

1. Wars between states or coalitions of states of the two opposing social systems, i.e. wars between imperialists and social states.
2. Wars between antagonistic classes within the confines of one state, i.e. civil war (which could, however, include limited outside support or intervention). This category covers wars of progressive revolutionary movements against ruling traditional or bourgeois classes.
3. Wars between imperialist states and peoples defending their freedom and independence or striving to achieve independence. This category includes wars of national liberation.
4. Wars between different capitalist states.<sup>55</sup>

Additionally, according to Lenin, only capitalist states conduct counterinsurgency wars because they are attempting to repress a progressive, socialist movement. Therefore, under this framework, whenever Socialists enter a war they are always supporting the insurgency – aka progressive movement – against a capitalist counterinsurgent.<sup>56</sup> This thought process precludes the need for a counterinsurgency doctrine. Therefore, when the Russian forces encountered the

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<sup>55</sup> Scott R. McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan* (London: Brassey's (UK) Ltd., 1991), 39.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

insurgent tactics employed by the mujahedeen, they could not fully understand the dynamics involved in the war.<sup>57</sup> This inability to recognize the disconnect between their ideology and the reality of having to fight a counterinsurgency war hindered and ultimately precluded the Russians from developing any counterinsurgency doctrine at all. The Russians encountered an equally daunting dilemma when attempting to address its technological deficiencies.

The majority of the changes that the General Staff envisioned as integral to successfully executing warfare in the future were contingent upon a sharp technological leap – high-precision weapons, electronic warfare systems, and improved helicopter systems and forces. Unfortunately, the General Staff understood that the Russian political leadership would not support such a recommendation because of the need for an increase in Russia’s economic capability to develop such advancements.<sup>58</sup> Decades of spending on nuclear weapons, maintaining an enormous military, and fighting a war for over nine years had finally taken its toll on the Russian economy. Russia simply did not have the capital to invest in the development of high-tech military equipment that would enable it compete with the United States.

Struggling with the above-mentioned political, economic, ideological, and military obstacles precluded any serious examination and implementation of the lessons that arose out of operations in Afghanistan. However, despite all of the internal challenges posed to the General Staff, there were a few areas that the lessons in Afghanistan influenced Russian military policy. The biggest lesson learned from the invasion of Afghanistan was that Russia should not engage militarily with the Third World or other areas that required a significant commitment of Russian resources.

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<sup>57</sup> Paul Dibb, ”The Soviet Experience in Afghanistan: Lessons to be Learned?” *Australian Journal Of International Affairs* 64, no. 5 (November 2010): 499, 501-502.

<sup>58</sup> David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Art: Challenges and Change in the 1990s* (Fort Leavenworth: Foreign Military Studies Office, 1991), 12, 14.

In engaging with these portions of the world, Russia risked overextending itself and, consequently, weakening its military to an unacceptable level.<sup>59</sup> While this realization did not trigger a widespread recall of all Russian military forces, it did trigger the eventual removal of forces from historically key bastions such as Czechoslovakia and Hungary. This reframing of the Russian role in the world along with reality that Russia was not economically prosperous enough to become embroiled in such operations served as the impetus for Mikhail Gorbachev's declaration of defensiveness as a guiding principal for Russian military thought.

A second lesson from the Afghanistan campaign was the belief that the Russian military "had neither the quality of troops, tactics, officers, and operational art ... needed to conduct conventional operations in the Third World under the conditions of the 1980s."<sup>60</sup> Eventually the problems with force structure, doctrine, training, and the need for massive force reductions, made its way to the floors of the Defense Council. The discussion sparked an evaluation of the current conscript army policy. The debate considered whether to keep the current conscript military or to transition to a smaller, more professional military.

The proponents of a professional military argued that a smaller, more competent military would decrease the technological gap between Russia and the West and address the management issues inherent in running a massive military. The supporters of a conscript military contended that a conscript military gave them a mobilization advantage over the West and it ensured that the military continued to represent the people that they defend. Despite the fact that a more professional military would solve two of Russia's overarching problems – namely the need to reduce the size of the force and the need to increase the force's competence in order to shorten the gap between Russia and the West – the Russian government maintained its massive conscript

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<sup>59</sup> Stephen J. Blank, *Operational and Strategic Lessons of the War in Afghanistan, 1979-90* (Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 1991), 4.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

military. The rationale given for this decision was that such a complete reversal of Russian practices that existed since the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 would shock the system to such a degree that it would be hard to recover.<sup>61</sup>

While the Afghanistan war provided many valuable lessons on how the Russian military should have approached the conduct of the war in Afghanistan – lessons that should have triggered a Kuhnian crisis within the Russian military – internal and external factors distracted the military from instituting any serious changes in Russian policy or doctrine. Moreover, the Russians were not comfortable with the concepts associated with counterinsurgency. This discomfort led them to return to the concepts of large, combined arms, violently offensive warfare that they understood.

Finally, since Russia was able to withdraw from Afghanistan relatively unscathed – it had only lost approximately 13,000 service members and the Afghan government was supportive of the Russians – it appeared that the Afghanistan war did not present itself as a Kuhnian crisis to the Russian way of war. Rather, it presented itself more as an anomaly that did not require a massive change in doctrine or policy. The social implosion of the country further distracted them from the view of a Kuhnian anomaly by forcing the Russian government to focus on social rather than military reforms. This view persisted through the next two engagements with Chechen forces.

#### **Case Study: First and Second Chechen Wars (1994-1996, 1999-2010)**

In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed economically, politically, and militarily. Its satellite nations had declared independence, its decreased military force was living in squalid conditions receiving little pay, and the government was anxiously searching for ways to make democracy

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<sup>61</sup> Harry Gelman, *Adelphi Papers #258: Gorbachev and the Future of the Soviet Military Institution* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1991), 36-38.

work. This led to a significant restructuring of the military into three types of forces: permanently ready forces, mobile and rapid reaction forces, and a one-million man strategic reserve. Russia adopted this organizational structure because the General Staff deemed that future war, with its emphasis on fragmented operations employing high-precision weapons, would require a highly flexible force.

This idea arose out of the discussions the General Staff had during the 1980s with respect to reacting to a nuclear strike by having dispersed and maneuverable forces.<sup>62</sup> This re-designed force would not have to wait long before it received action. This section will identify some of the key components of the Russian struggles with Chechnya with respect to the lessons that came out of the Afghanistan invasion.

#### First Chechen War (1994-96)

Russia was involved in the North Caucasus with varying degrees of success since the 1800s. The region, which includes Chechnya, remained a source of constant aggravation to the Russians because of its peoples' refusal to submit to Russian rule. Therefore, Russia viewed Chechnya as nominally a part of the Soviet Union via the occupation of the area with Russian forces. Finally, after the fall of the Soviet Union fractured the federation into semi-autonomous territories, Chechnya – as a belligerent territory – intensified its efforts to break away from the grasp of the Russian Federation. Viewing this attempt to sever ties with Russia, the Russian government decided to attempt a political coup over the Dudayev Regime in Chechnya. When this attempt failed, the Russian government decided to forcefully overthrow the self-proclaimed government and install a pro-Russian regime.

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<sup>62</sup> Michael D. Krause and R. Cody Phillips, *Historical Perspectives of the Operational Art* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2007), 278.

Military preparations in advance of the invasion of Chechnya resembled the preparations for the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Specifically, troop training and preparation equipped them to conduct conventional warfare against a weak opponent.<sup>63</sup> This force relied less on its military prowess and sound understanding of the mission and operational environment than it did on the belief that its presence alone would force the opponent to submit. Additionally, the plan established by the General Staff envisioned an operation that included four phases – forward deployment, blockade of Grozny, securing key infrastructure and disarming rebels, and stabilization and transition to the Ministry of Internal Affairs – and would last one month. In order to coordinate the activities of the Defense and Internal Affairs ministries, the General Staff established an Operational Group in Mozdok led by General Lieutenant L. Shevcov.<sup>64</sup> However, Russian planners made some of the same mistakes they had fifteen years ago when they invaded Afghanistan.

The two most prominent errors made by the General Staff in its development of the plan was to underestimate the capabilities of the Chechen forces and the failure to account for the opponent's use of the mountainous and urban terrain as safe havens and base camps.<sup>65</sup> The failure to estimate the level of resistance employed by the Chechen forces exemplified itself in the training for urban operations. Despite the fact that the main portion of the operation included the assault and securing of the Chechen capital of Grozny, Russian forces received only five or six hours of urban training out of the total of 151 hours allotted for preparations.<sup>66</sup> These failures

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<sup>63</sup> Robert Seely, *Russo-Chechen Conflict, 1800-2000: A Deadly Embrace* (Portland: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), 221-222.

<sup>64</sup> Stasys Knezys and Romanas Sedlickas, *The War in Chechnya* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 55.

<sup>65</sup> Robert Seely, *Russo-Chechen Conflict, 1800-2000: A Deadly Embrace* (Portland: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), 222.

<sup>66</sup> Olga Olikier, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994-2000* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), 8.

highlighted the fact that Russian planners had not taken from their time in Afghanistan the lesson of understanding their opponent and would negatively affect the Russian operation as it unfolded over the next two years.

Eventually, the Russians were able to seize and control Grozny. However, the Chechen rebels were able to force a negotiation after they attacked the Russian town of Budennovsk and took hostages in June of 1995. Despite attempts by Russian *Spetsnaz* troops to retake a key Chechen rebel stronghold – the city hospital – they could not defeat the enemy forces. After two failed attempts, the Russian Prime Minister decided to negotiate. The negotiations – which served to increase the Chechen rebels’ legitimacy – resulted in the rebels’ safe passage out of the city. Over the next year, Chechen rebels conducted similar attacks in Gudermes – Chechnya’s second oldest city – and Grozny that would eventually wear down Russian forces. Finally, the Russians yielded and departed Chechnya under a negotiated settlement.

#### Lessons of the First Chechen War

The time between the First and Second Chechen Wars – 1996 to 1999 – was too short of a period to realize any significant changes and subsequent implementation of Russia’s doctrine. However, the fact that the Russians foresaw a return trip almost as soon as they left Chechnya in 1996 provided them the rare opportunity to plan to re-fight the last war. Consequently, they made two key operational changes: increased interoperability between different ministries within the Russian government and new solutions for the lack of urban training.

In an attempt to increase interoperability between the disparate ministries – Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Federal Security Bureau, and others – the Russians placed these independent ministries under the control of the military district commander.<sup>67</sup> The lack of

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<sup>67</sup> Olga Oliker, *Russia’s Chechen Wars 1994-2000* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), 33.

coordination between these entities proved to be a problem during the First Chechen War when the leaders were unable to synchronize their actions during the assault of Grozny and decisions were severely muddled because of the numerous command relationships.<sup>68</sup> By unifying these ministries under one commander – who would answer to the General Staff – before the second invasion, the Russians believed they could reduce the inefficiencies of the last war. Next, the Russians had to address the operational problem of urban operations.

As mentioned previously, the Russian forces that attacked Grozny in 1994 received minimal, if any, training on urban operations prior to the attack. In order to address this issue, the General Staff focused on a siege of urban areas consisting of airstrikes and artillery shells rather than assaulting with troops.<sup>69</sup> The reason the Russians adopted this approach rather than developing a training plan that emphasized urban operations had to do with both its continued unease with implementing counterinsurgency concepts and its large conscript army. Their conscript army generally consisted of uneducated and poor young men. Therefore, attempting to teach this particular audience of individuals maneuvers that rely upon quick decision-making and bold maneuvers would have been an exercise in futility. Therefore, given these constraints, the Russian planners chose to address the urban operations problem by eliminating it – a prospect that did not advance their efforts towards developing a counterinsurgency strategy.

#### Second Chechen War (1999 – 2010)

The selection of Vladimir Putin as Prime Minister in August 1999 and his subsequent election to President in March 2000 resurfaced talk of engaging Chechnya a second time. Putin vehemently opposed the idea of a separate Chechnya and subsequently took actions to re-engage

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<sup>68</sup> Olga Olikier, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994-2000* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), 14.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

the Chechen rebels. On a political level, Putin framed the Chechen problem more as a struggle against radical Islamists, which the world should support as opposed to a separatist territory attempting to gain independence.<sup>70</sup> All Putin needed was a spark to ignite his ambition of annihilating his enemy.

The spark for the beginning of the second Chechen War occurred when Chechens, Wahhabis, and other Muslim soldiers attacked into Dagestan in August 1999. In response, Russia sent elements from its Interior forces to meet the aggression.<sup>71</sup> Chechens further enflamed the conflict by allegedly bombing three apartment blocks in Moscow, Volgodonsk, and Buinaksk a few weeks later in September 1999.<sup>72</sup> These bombings further solidified Russian hatred towards the Chechens. As the campaign continued, Defense forces replaced Interior forces. These Defense forces advanced all the way to Grozny and began to bombard the town incessantly. During their advance, Russian military forces heavily bombarded their opponents with air and artillery assets in advance of ground forces – a lesson learned from the previous operation against the Chechens. However, this had the effect of destroying many villages and killing many civilians, which created more enemies than it destroyed.

By the end of October 1999, Russian forces were conducting over 150 air strikes a day on targets in Grozny.<sup>73</sup> This massive and devastating attack on Grozny forced many rebels to flee to the safety of the surrounding mountains or blend in with the local population. Although the

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<sup>70</sup> Ariel Cohen, *Russia's Counterinsurgency in North Caucasus: Performance and Consequences* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: United States Army War College Press, March 2014), 40.

<sup>71</sup> Matthew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press: 2002), 63.

<sup>72</sup> John Russell, *Chechnya – Russia's 'War on Terror'* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 74.

<sup>73</sup> Matthew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press: 2002), 70.

Chechen forces fled, they did not give up the fight. Instead, they transitioned to guerrilla tactics and bled the Russians over the remaining years of the conflict.

#### Lessons of the Second Chechen War

The Russian forces that operated in the Second Chechen War demonstrated that they had learned some of the lessons from the previous conflict. However, despite these changes, Russian forces continued to fall into old traps such as indiscriminate use of firepower that alienated the population and an inability to coordinate actions between different elements of the government (i.e. Interior forces and Ministry of Defense forces). Understanding these deficiencies, President Putin signed *Military Doctrine 2000* in April 2000 – which included input from the General Staff – in an attempt to address these problems.

*Military Doctrine 2000* was a landmark document in Russian military thought. What was striking about this document was its increased emphasis on fighting local wars. Up to this point in time, the Russian military had strictly trained and prepared its forces to fight a conventional war against the United States. This focus was so ingrained in the Russian military mind that they viewed their experiences in Afghanistan and the American experience in Vietnam as irrelevant.<sup>74</sup> While this document called for a shift in focus from the West to dangers along its own borders, it did not outline a new task organization to support such a move.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, while *Military Doctrine 2000* would appear on its surface to be a paradigm shift for the Russian military, the lack of any steps to restructure the Russian military to support such a doctrine suggests otherwise.

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<sup>74</sup> Dmitri V. Trenin and Aleksei V. Malashenko, *Russia's Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: 2004), 121.

<sup>75</sup> Stephen J. Blank, ed., *Russian Military Politics and Russia's 2010 Defense Doctrine* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, March 2011), 54.

This would continue to be a major challenge for the Russian government due to its main belief in a conscript army. The document also addressed the problems of joint command and control.

Russia's problems with joint command stemmed from its failure to devise a comprehensive strategy to deal with uprisings from its interior. Upon the Chechen invasion of Dagestan in August 1999, the initial forces to react to the threat were Interior forces. The reason for their involvement in the beginning was that the Russian government viewed this attack as a terrorist threat. However, as the situation developed, the Russian government realized that the Ministry of Defense forces would be better equipped to deal with the Chechen forces. This transition created tension between the forces. As the General Staff, at the time, did not have control over all of the nation's forces, they could not effectively coordinate between the elements.<sup>76</sup>

Putin's answer to coordination between the different agents of the government was to consolidate power under the President and the National Security Council.<sup>77</sup> This move to consolidate power only pushed the Russians farther away from developing an effective counterinsurgency strategy. In line with this centralized power, the subordinate organizations were to establish "a new system of cooperation with other force structures of Russia."<sup>78</sup> While the Minister of Defense wrote in 2003 that the affected agencies took these measures, critics such a renowned defense correspondent Aleksandr Golts doubted the veracity of the Minister's claims. If Golts' accusation was true, then it was doubtful that the Russians were any closer to developing a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy that included all branches of Russia's defense forces.

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<sup>76</sup> Dmitri V. Trenin and Aleksei V. Malashenko, *Russia's Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: 2004), 136.

<sup>77</sup> Stephen J. Blank, ed., *Russian Military Politics and Russia's 2010 Defense Doctrine* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, March 2011), 103.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

## Conclusion

This monograph sought to explain how the Russian General Staff reacted to the challenges posed by the Afghan insurgent forces following the Russian invasion into Afghanistan in 1979. Then, it examined how those identified challenges shaped how the Russians conducted two separate operations against the Chechens. In understanding Russian actions, this monograph used the scientific theory proposed by Kuhn. This theory states that in order to maintain a unified understanding of the world, scientists tend to view challenges to their beliefs as mere anomalies instead of as a crisis that requires a significant shift in thinking. With respect to the Russians, this theory proved to be a plausible explanation for the lack of organizational learning on the part of the Russian between Afghanistan and Chechnya.

The Russian military, as a representation of the Russian government and people, was wedded to the notion that massive mechanized and armored formations, conducting large offensive operations, was the only effective way to conduct military operations. This notion arose out of their experiences in the latter portion of the Second World War and their experiences in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. However, once they realized that this paradigm of warfare was no longer applicable in the environment in Afghanistan, they grudgingly adapted their methods to focus less on large formations and more on mobile and specialized troops. Unfortunately, their transition occurred too late in the operation to produce any significant results because their heavy-handed approach had alienated large portions of the Afghan population. Once they realized this, the Russians began looking for a way out of the conflict.

Upon their exit from Afghanistan, the Russians had a decision to make. Either they could view their experiences in Afghanistan as a challenge to their way of war and adapt their doctrine as necessary or they could view the Afghanistan campaign as an aberration and continue to train and educate their forces using their old paradigm of employing overwhelming firepower in an offensive nature against their adversaries. They chose the latter for a myriad of reasons.

First, while some elements of the Russian military – namely aviation and special forces – understood the importance of their experiences in Afghanistan, the majority of the force – including the General Staff – desired to forget the war in Afghanistan and continue with the old ways of operating. Secondly, immediately following the conclusion of the war in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union collapsed. This turn of events had a damaging effect on the Russian military by reducing its numbers, placing the military in neglected barracks, and by inadequately paying them. This increased pressure on the military prevented the force from implementing radical changes because such changes would require intensive time and resources to train the force for counterinsurgency operations.

Finally, the Russian government and military held onto the belief that the military should be primarily composed of the working class – a Marxist-Leninist and communist belief. This ensured that the military did not lose its tie to the population it protected. Additionally, under Russian beliefs, maintaining a force of this composition enabled a more fervent national mobilization. However, having a conscript army composed of people who were generally not highly educated precluded the Russian military from developing a force that could effectively operate in a counterinsurgency environment. These challenges would plague the Russian army in their operations in Chechnya.

As with its previous operations in Afghanistan, the Russian military approached their engagement against Chechen forces in 1994 with an offensive and violent mindset because they did not fully understand their Chechen adversary. This lack of understanding led them to view the Chechens as weak, incompetent, and unwilling to stand up to the Russian military. Therefore, the Chechen forces proved capable of employing guerrilla tactics to defeat the main Russian force.

The second war with Chechnya provided the Russians with an opportunity to adjust their approach. Instead of conducting the operation with an approach that recognized the importance of reducing the effects on civilian lives and property, they were more violent in their application of force. This allowed them to achieve a relatively quick victory by taking Grozny, but the

adversaries escaped to conduct guerrilla tactics. By transitioning to guerrilla warfare, the Chechens were able to bleed the Russian forces over the next decade. Despite this dismal outcome, the Russians did take steps to transform its military.

*Military Doctrine 2000* was the first step in recognizing the need to focus on “local wars.” While it did not represent a complete Kuhnian paradigm shift for the Russian military because it still identified the conventional threat from the West – i.e. the United States – as the main threat to the Russian state, it was a start. Additionally, the Russians have yet to prove through resourcing and task organizing their force that they are serious about conducting effective counterinsurgency warfare.

The United States could learn much from the Russian experiences in Afghanistan and Chechnya. It had the opportunity after Vietnam to transform the force into one capable of operating effectively in a counterinsurgency environment. Because the United States did not take those lessons seriously, it faced a steep learning curve in its operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. While this monograph does not advocate strictly preparing for the next war based on the previous war, it does caution that a tendency to remain wedded to a specific approach to warfare that one is comfortable with can have serious repercussions in future operations. A military must be agile and adaptable if it wants to be successful in war.

Today we have seen the Russians operating in much the same way as they had in Afghanistan and Chechnya. They invaded Crimea under the auspices of protecting Russian nationalists from Ukrainian governmental oppression and because they viewed Ukraine’s vie for North Atlantic Treaty Organization membership as a threat to the Russian sphere of influence. What has changed is their tactics. Instead of deploying large formations into the area, they chose to employ a lighter force. However, they still massed large formations on the Ukrainian border as a show of force. Therefore, it is apparent to the author that the Russians are still operating off their old concepts of forcible entry with a few added twists.

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